



AAC Publications

Kondus Glacier: Link Sar, Northeast Face, Attempt, Fiost Brakk, and Other Ascents

Pakistan, Karakoram, Tagas Mountains

THE PEAKS of the Kondus and Kaberi valleys are mostly virgin. Some rise above 7,000m. The valleys are part of the Gilgit-Baltistan region, once in the ancient kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir and nowadays in territory disputed by Pakistan, India, and China. Since 1947 the region has been characterized by conflicts and political disagreements. As a consequence, there have been various times when access to foreigners has been banned. In 2003 there was a ceasefire, and the Actual Ground Position Line (the line that separates the opposing troops in the Siachen Glacier region) became the new boundary between Pakistan and India, though this has not yet been recognized as the international frontier.

In 1979 a Japanese expedition made the first attempt on Link Sar (7,041m). After a long period of closure due to the Siachen Conflict, the area was re-opened in 2000, and the following year an American expedition (Swenson, et al) explored lines on the southeast, east, and north sides of Link Sar. After this, the area was closed again and no one visited these sides of Link Sar for the next 16 years. However, beginning in 2012 Jon Griffith made four attempts in successive years to climb the mountain from the Charakusa Valley to the west, eventually reaching the top of Link Sar West (6,938m) in 2015 with Andy Houseman.

Our primarily Italian team—Tom Ballard (U.K.), Kate Ballard (U.K., trekker), Cuan Coetzee (South African, trekker), Gian Luca Cavalli, Michele Focchi, Daniele Nardi, Pier Luigi Martini (camerman), and me—left Skardu on July 31 and drove to a provisional base camp at 3,400m on the east bank of the Kondus Glacier, just below the point where the Kaberi Glacier comes in from the left. Landslides on the road prevented us from driving further, and before this, several military checkpoints had been difficult to negotiate.

From here Tom, Michele, and Daniele began their acclimatization by spending two days completing a new rock route, Welcome to the Jungle (950m, UIAA VI+ A0), on a formation they named Scimitara Rossa (4,400m). Above their finish lay a really big wall, around 1,000m high, rising to a summit of around 5,600m that they dubbed Alison Peak.

In the meantime, Gian Luca and I carried loads to a camp below the southeast face of Link Sar, the aspect attempted to around 6,000m by the Japanese. After looking at the face and talking with the Americans Steve Swenson, Chris Wright, and Graham Zimmerman, who had arrived a few weeks previously with the same objective, Gian Luca, Michele, and I decided we didn't have enough time to make a serious attempt on Link Sar; Tom and Daniele also decided against this aspect of Link Sar and focused on the northeast face instead. We moved our base camp up to 3,600m, on the west side of the Kondus Glacier, directly below the east side of Link Sar.

Gian Luca, Michele, and I opted to explore the unnamed glacier (which we dubbed Ghiacciaio Marta) immediately south of the K6 Glacier, and in mid-August, with the help of porters, established a high camp at around 4,800m. We spent eight days there and climbed two new routes.

We first concentrated on a subsummit (Fiost Brakk, 5,850m, "Friendship Peak" in Balti) of a higher peak we named Black Rock Brakk (ca 6,150m). At 9 p.m. on August 17 we walked one hour from our camp to the bottom of a rock pillar, climbed several pitches up to UIAA VII+, then moved left onto a hanging glacier. Large seracs required strenuous climbing on thin icy ridges. Deep snow then slowed progress, and the final wall provided several technical pitches on poor quality ice that was difficult to protect. We reached the summit at 1 p.m. on the 19th after 27 hours of continuous climbing. After a bivouac with no gear we traversed sharp ridges, often *à cheval*, to another rock summit from which we descended in 20 rappels. Sixteen hours after leaving the bivouac we were back in camp.

Our route was Amman in Kashmir (950m, 1,300m of climbing, ED+ 6b AI6 X; amman means "peace").

High above Fiost Brakk lie two icy summits that we named Elisa Brakk and Mattia Brakk; they are unclimbed and estimated to be between 6,200m and 6,300m. On the morning of the 21st we left early and climbed a rock spire on the north side of the glacier, below our camp. We named our route Via delle Poiane (450m, TD+ 6b+) and the summit Punta Città di Biella (approximately 5,505m). As the weather was deteriorating, we returned to base camp the following day.

In the meantime, Daniele and Tom had attempted Link Sar, as reported below, and Kate and Cuan had explored the lower Kaberi Glacier and made the first ascent of the ca 5,300m foresummit of an easy peak of around 5,500m they called Mt. Ulu (Owl).

– Marcello Sanguineti, CAAI, Italy

Daniele Nardi writes: "From our Camp 1 on the Kondus Glacier at 4,050m, directly opposite the mountain, Tom and I decided to attempt the northeast aspect of Link Sar via what we dubbed the Utopia Glacier. We climbed a wide glaciated couloir behind a prominent rock spire to reach Camp 2 at 5,200m on a snow spur. It was steeper than expected; we had to belay some pitches or climb together for speed. During the night at this camp, a large serac collapsed and swept the couloir.

"The following morning we left for Camp 3. The sun was harsh, so we decided to leave late, hoping for some protection from the cloud. The forecast was good for some days, but looking east toward the big peaks of Saltoro Kangri and Sherpi Kangri, I could see spiral-formation clouds building on their summits. In two hours it was snowing. We climbed around to the right of the first large rock tower on the spur above, where we found the best climbing of the day: 70° ice leading to fine mixed terrain. We reached Camp 3 (5,800m) at midnight. To this point we had climbed 1,700m of the 3,000m face. The section from Camp 1 to 2 averages 55°, with some vertical sections and objective danger from avalanches and serac fall; from Camp 2 to 3 there had been 14 pitches with difficulties up to WI5 M5. "We decided to rest one day at Camp 3 and soon realized the forecast had been wrong: It snowed for three days, and on the morning of the fourth we started down. The descent was a trial of soft snow, avalanches, and a heavy rucksack that we had to lower in places. Before we reached Camp 2 a large avalanche came over the rock spur above. For a moment I thought it was all over. The snow continued to build over my helmet and behind my back, but after a little more than a minute the force died away, leaving me to clean up and get warm again. At Camp 2 we opted to wait for the coldest hours of the night before descending the couloir below.

"Our exploration of the area was a small pebble thrown into the sea of international relations in the hope that Pakistan, India, and China might decide to make this area a world park with free access. Perhaps this is a utopia, given the geopolitical difficulties in the region, but if you give up throwing the pebble, nothing will ever happen. The expedition was a crazy experience with exceptional companions. You can get the best out of yourself when you know you have your back covered by people on whom you can count."

– Daniele Nardi, Italy

Images



Looking northeast down the unnamed glacier south of K6 Glacier at Via delle Poiane on the south pillar of Punta Città di Biella.

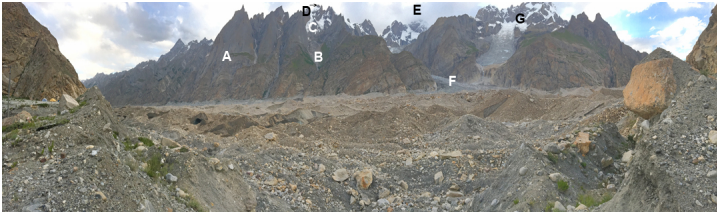


Looking approximately southwest into the unnamed glacier (which the Italians called Ghiacciaio Marta) immediately south of the chaotic K6 Glacier to the right. (A) Black Rock Brakk. (B) Fiost Brakk and the line of Amman in Kashmir. (C) Mattia Brakk. (D) Elisa Brakk. (E) Punta Città di Biella (Via delle Poiane roughly follows its left skyline). (F) Changi Tower (Bennett-Swenson-Zimmerman, 2015).



Unclimbed Alison Peak from the east. (W) marks the start of the line Welcome to the Jungle, which

reaches the top of a point (S) named Scimitara Rossa (4,400m). Alison Peak is thought to be around 5,600m, and the photograph is taken from the banks of the Kondus Glacier at 3,600m. Gian Luca Cavalli



A panorama looking southwest to west from base camp near the junction of the Kondus and Kaberi. (A) Alison Peak. (B) Gorge used to gain unnamed glacier basin. (C) Fiost Brakk. (D) Mattia and Elisa peaks. (E) K6. (F) K6 Glacier. (G) Link Sar (southeast face).



Gian Luca Cavalli riding an ice fin during the first ascent of Amman in Kashmir on Fiost Brakk.



Marcello Sanguineti, belayed by Gian Luca Cavalli, on the lower section of Amman in Kashmir on Fiost Brakk.



Gian Luca Cavalli on the Via delle Poiane with Black Rock Brakk, Mattia Brakk, Elisa Brakk, and Fiostr Brakk behind.



Gian Luca Cavalli about to tunnel behind a chockstone at around two-thirds height on Via delle Poiane, Punta Città di Biella.

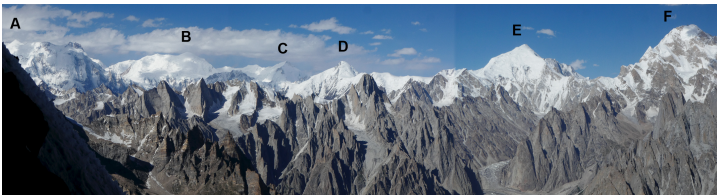


Marcello Sanguineti on the compact slabs of Via delle Poiane, Punta Città di Biella. The rock offered

great friction but scant protection.



Looking over the K6 Glacier from the upper section of Ghiacciaio Marta to (A) Hassin Peak (approximately 6,300m, climbed from the far side in 2011 by Kyle Dempster and Hayden Kennedy). (B) K7 (6,934m). (C) Link Sar West (6,938m, climbed in 2015 by Jon Griffith and Andy Houseman). (D) Unclimbed Link Sar (7,041m), with the southeast face pointing toward the camera. K6 is off picture to the left.



Panorama looking northeast to east over the Saltoro Range from glacier dubbed Ghiacciaio Marta by the 2017 team. (A) Baltoro Kangri (7,300m). (B) Sia Kangri (7,424m). (C) Mt. Hardinge (Sia Kangri South, 7,075m). (D) Silver Throne (6,630m). (E) Ghent (7,401m). (F) Sherpi Kangri (7,380m).



Marcello Sanguineti traversing sharp arêtes of unconsolidated snow on the upper section of Amman in Kashmir on Fiostr Brakk.



Daniele Nardi during the first ascent of Welcome to the Jungle on Scimitar Rossa.



Tom Ballard on the northeast face of Link Sar. Camp 2 at 5,200m is visible below. The approach couloir came up to looker's right of the prominent rock pinnacle.



Daniele Nardi on the northeast face of Link Sar.



Possibilities for progress above Ballard and Nardi's 2017 high point, Camp 3 (5,600m), on the northeast face of Link Sar.



The Ballard-Nardi attempt on the northeast face of Link Sar.

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